

BEECHER, LYMAN

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# Abraham Lincoln and Reformers

Lyman Beecher

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## A PULPIT PERSONALITY—LYMAN BEECHER

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As we study the lives of those men whom down through the ages God has used to transmit the message of eternal life, we cannot fail to be impressed with the varied types of personality through which He works. It is the task of one man to explain the scriptures and what he has seen and heard, and we have a Paul; of another to boldly flame against the corruption and infidelity of his times, and we have a Chrysostom. One man feels he is anointed to preach the Gospel to the poor, and a saintly life is preserved in the memory of time in a St. Francis. The service of one man is passive, mystic, contemplative of the Eternal, and we have an Augustine; of another, aggressive, boldly assertive, aflame with enthusiasm, and we have a Luther; of still another, scholarly, analytical, persuasive, and we have a Bossuet and a Wesley.

These are Old World men but not Old World types. These are characteristics which, alone or blended, in part or in the whole, are to be found in all the great personalities of the pulpit since the name of God was first written in the hearts of men.

Charmed with the story of such lives it was with a sense of exultation that I felt the pulse of a personality of our own nation and even of our section of the country. Lyman Beecher will be remembered as the greatest preacher in one of the most critical periods of our peculiar religious history, as a man who impressed the stamp of righteousness on the conscience of his day, and so imbued his children with the spirit of God as to leave to posterity the most famous family in Christian service in the annals of America. As with all men of a distinctly reconstructive or formative period, Beecher was partly the product of the times, the verbal expression of a widely diffused thought, and partly a "man sent by God" to foster that thought and defend it as his own. He was a man of unusually diverse talents. Let us

watch him as with perfect skill and cool precision he constructs a lawyer-like argument which assails the bulwarks of Unitarianism, or as, upon the platform or in private, with tender accents and eyes often suffused with tears, he tells of the redeeming love of Christ and works upon the hearts of men. Only the crucible of the Almighty could have fused characteristics so different into a personality so positive.

Dr. Beecher's life extended over the whole momentous period between the two great American wars. Born in 1775, the blood of "the Spirit of '76" may be said to have flowed through his veins, while his last low pulse-beat scarcely prevented his aged ear from hearing the echo of the Proclamation of '63. He thus came into an age which displayed as much the passions and the achievements of men as any age has ever done. His father was a poor man, a blacksmith of New Haven. His mother died while he was a baby and he was brought up by an uncle, a farmer. It was while doing a disagreeable piece of work in an unsatisfactory manner on his uncle's farm that at the latter's suggestion, he resolved to obtain an education. His father agreed with his plan and he went to New Haven. Here he studied with various teachers and in 1793, at the age of eighteen, entered Yale College. The college at that time was very small, the equipment poor, instruction worse, and moral tone worst. The students were largely atheists. It was at the beginning of Beecher's third year that Dr. Dwight became president of the college. The latter was the leader of the revival spirit on this side of the Atlantic. He was a good logician and rhetorician. Within a year he had answered all the students' questions in religious matters, cleaned up the atheistic spirit, and substituted a distinctly religious tone. Young Beecher was tremendously impressed by the man, and, encouraged by him, finally formed the idea that he should go into the ministry. He had never had any very deep religious convictions, and had felt that the natural qualities of his mind could be used to best advantage in the law. Yet in answer to what I should term the blind call of God, he decided to preach. After he had made this decision, he was unable to go forward with the zeal and enthusiasm which he desired because he felt his own unworthiness, and, in



fact, doubted his own salvation. His life-long conviction was that "it is true that a deep, genuine work of the Holy Spirit, in revealing to the soul its guilt and lost condition, is and ever must be painful." So that even after he had begun his student preaching he was constantly in despair because of the hardness of his heart toward God, and we find a vivid portrayal of that feeling in his love-letters to the woman who was afterwards to become his wife. His equal solicitude for her eternal welfare, as evidenced, too, in these letters, brings a smile to our faces, as we mark their contrast with the commonly accepted idea of what such letters should be; but they serve to illustrate the earnestness with which Beecher sought to place all things right with God.

His first call came from East Hampton on Long Island. By this time he had found his peace and entered into his work with earnestness and zeal. He himself says of this time that he was "vehement and impulsive," that he "tore a passion to tatters," and in his autobiography quotes from Niles, a student friend, that he was too vehement and flowery and metaphorical. However that may be, he knew how to make an application of his sermons and bring the truth home to his people. His work was blessed in East Hampton and he made many conversions. Almost at the first of his ministry here we learn that eighty were converted and fifty joined the church, while later on a hundred were converted, stirred to action by his sermons on "Election" and the "Government of God Desirable." A hasty survey of this latter sermon reveals its power as an appeal to the reason. Beecher puts his subject into the form of a proposition which he proceeds to analyze and prove in a lawyer-like way. Yet through it all there is that figurative style of language so characteristic of him, that easy manner of saying something in a pleasing way without stepping aside for the mere purpose of employing a beautiful figure, which may well be the envy of us unimaginative souls. These sermons found a wider circle than his immediate parish, for he preached them in New York and "The Government of God Desirable" he had printed. At the end of five years his reputation had grown enough to secure for him a call from Litchfield, Connecticut. Early in his ministry

at East Hampton he had married, and with a growing family he found his salary of four hundred dollars a year inadequate, so that he accepted the new call and transferred his work to a wider and more important field.

At Litchfield he came in touch with men of education who were able to appreciate his intellect and logic. Litchfield was at that time noted for its able lawyers, doctors, and teachers. Young men from various parts of the country and occasionally from the Old World flocked here to be taught of such men as Judge Gould and Judge Reeve. This was the kind of a congregation for Beecher, and noble and scholarly were the thoughts that flowed from his pen and heart. Yet I would not have you think that he sacrificed to literature and the love of the æsthetic the nobler sentiments of the soul. Dearer to him was the approval of God than the admiration of men, yet he won the commendation of both. He preached revival to a congregation which hated revivals, which had been reported to have "voted Christ out of their borders," he prophesied and he prayed for revival, and it came. The humblest and the proudest of his congregation heard through him the voice of the Almighty, and hearing gave heed. He was always careful not to arouse a religious excitement which would bring on a reaction, so that his revival work was spread over the whole sixteen years of his pastorate and gave to the church a healthful, steady growth. While here Beecher became interested in temperance, and it was in 1812 that at a General Assembly, as chairman of a committee, he drew up a report which he claimed in his autobiography was the most important paper he ever wrote. In this report he rehearsed the evils of prevailing intemperance and made some practical suggestions for working against them. We can all recall from our general knowledge of history how common was the use of liquor in those days. The autobiography gives us as an illustration an account of a minister's ordination which Beecher attended. "And the sideboard, with the spilling of water, and sugar, and liquor, looked and smelled like the bar of a very active grog-shop. None of the Consociation were drunk; but that there was not at times a considerable amount of exhilaration, I cannot affirm." The Assembly followed



Beecher's suggestions with far reaching results for good. "This report stands among the earliest documents of the great Temperance Reformation," and deserves study by any one interested in the subject and its history.

Beecher's reputation was now widely extended and he was everywhere regarded as a man of unusual depth and power. He was often called upon to visit other places on special occasions and had flattering invitations to fill other pulpits. It was of interest to me to find an account of a visit to Hartford at this time to help in revival work here. During these years at Litchfield he preached often nine times a week and frequently assisted neighboring churches in revival work. His desire was to pass his life in this particular field, and doubtless he would have done so but for the need of a larger salary to support his family. Some of his children were at school and college and required more assistance than could be afforded by so meager a salary. So in 1826 he accepted the pastorate in Hanover Street Church in Boston.

There was more than one reason for his being called to this church. He was well known as a revivalist. He was able and willing as an orthodox Presbyterian to take up the defense of Calvinism against the movement of the Unitarians. He was in the prime of life, a man well seasoned in thought, and willing if necessary to oppose a heresy which "was from the first as a fire in his veins."

When he first began to preach in his new church people flocked to listen to him, expecting to hear the thunder and the earthquake. They heard nothing of the sort. "I began with prudence," says Beecher, "because a minister, however well known at home, and however wise and successful he *has* been, has to make himself a character anew, and find out what material is around him. . . . I made no attack on Unitarians. I carried the state of revival feeling I had had at Litchfield for years." It warms the soul to read Beecher's own account of these times and all should do so who are interested in revival methods. "Fifteen the first week at the inquiry meeting, twenty the second, thirty-five the third, and the fourth time three hundred." People from all classes and walks in life came

to him for help. He was able with equal ease to give words of comfort which soothed the despondent, or arguments which settled the doubts of the skeptic. "When the two gentlemen came on to see me, I took them into my inquiry room. There was great variety of cases. Language of simplicity came along, and they'd see me talking way down in language fit for children, and then, the next moment, rise into clear, strong, philosophical language. And then the language of free agency and ability came along, and then they told me afterward, they thought I was going to be a — what d'ye call it? — Arminian, and they'd stick up their ears. I *made something* of free agency — more than a Calvinist would do usually and brought folks up to *do* what they were able to. But next minute came along the plea of morality and self-dependence, and I took them by the nape of the neck and twisted their neck off. So they saw that I had my replies according to the nature of the subject, and in the course of the evening heard me touch on seven or eight or more different states of mind."

Beecher's notable work here was the defense of Calvinism in its struggle against Unitarianism. The Unitarian Church had in its membership all of the educated and literary men of the community. Calvinism was a despised sect. Nearly all the pulpits of fashion were filled by Unitarian preachers. "All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians. Old foundations, established by the Pilgrim Fathers . . . for teaching their own views . . . were seized upon for the support of opposing views. A fund for preaching an annual lecture on the Trinity was employed for preaching an attack upon it."

The Unitarians were not unaware of Beecher's meetings. People began to leave their own church and go to them. Many were there converted. Others ridiculed Beecher and his work, forbade their wives and children to attend his meetings, and spent all their influence with the press, politics, and society, to injure the movement. So Beecher was gradually forced into a definite defense of Calvinism and we find him at work on a periodical, "The Spirit of the Pilgrims." Here the doctrines of his faith were carefully explained and the work of the

orthodox church recorded and forwarded. He entered into a discussion on Infant Salvation, showing that his opponents were wrong when they claimed that the Calvinists believed in damnation of such. He delivered and published a course of "Lectures on Political Atheism." Let me quote from one of these lectures to give some indication of his vigor. After having given a list of the misjudgments commonly imputed to Calvinism, he says, "It is needless to say that falsehoods more absolute and entire were never stereotyped in the foundry of the Father of Lies, or with greater industry worked off for gratuitous distribution from age to age."

There was fire in all his talk and the Unitarians quailed under it. The Presbyterians, on the other hand, hailed his support with delight. Orthodox churches increased in prestige and power and exulted in the consciousness of a deliverer. I do not wish to leave the impression that Beecher's natural inclination lay along the line of polemics. Haywood, in his biography, speaks of Beecher's belligerent tone in writings and addresses and says that "nothing was too bitter for him to say against the offending sect"; that "he failed utterly to see that, with all their limitations, these people were at least honest." My opinion is that Haywood is mistaken here and that Beecher took a very fair position under the circumstances. I think that if he could have done as he wished, he would have devoted little time to actual controversy and have been content to have kept on with revival work which was so dear to him. He was forced into the arena by the need of his times, because he was fitted to take up the work and he did it well. Unfortunately complete success was denied him; for at a time when all bid fair for a victory for Calvinism, a difficulty arose in their own ranks. In the effort to clearly define their doctrine they stated that "God governs the universe by motive and not by force." Many of them "did not come up to this position fair and square." A controversy arose which occupied the attention of "The Spirit of the Pilgrims" to the exclusion of Unitarianism, and divided the friendly ranks. Involved in a new discussion, Beecher kept up the double struggle and brought into play his splendid powers of clear-headed argument, striving to unite his brethren, preserve



the unbroken crest of orthodoxy, and oppose all the attacks of Unitarianism. The differences which arose in the Presbyterian Church were never settled and were a part of the movement which resulted in the New School. Of this we shall speak later in another connection.

Meanwhile Beecher was busy in other lines of work. The revivals were still going on, the inquiry room was still demanding his attention. Then, too, Beecher was interesting himself in young men, and several societies for political and social betterment took form under his fostering care and achieved splendid results. Nor ought we longer to neglect to take a glimpse into his home life and see the great man as he was in his family at this time. His daughter, later Mrs. Stowe, writes charmingly of this life. Dr. Beecher was so busily occupied during the week that it was only of a Sunday night that he might be sure to be free from care. After the evening service he would return home and allow himself "to run down." Out came his old fiddle and he would play a merry tune such as "Money Musk" and "Go to the Devil and Shake Yourself:" the children sang and even the little ones were allowed to stay up beyond the wonted hour and enjoy their father's company. If the mother retired before the rest, Beecher, in his stocking-feet, could sometimes be persuaded to execute a double-shuffle as he used to do as a boy on the barn floor at corn huskings.

Perfect freedom of speech was allowed in his household. If one of the children held a point of view different from his own, he encouraged him to defend it and would often give a hint of helpfulness to aid the feebler argument. Only in one particular was he severe; he would allow no one to use sophistical or false reasoning. The whole argument must be above board and legitimate. He encouraged the quip, the jest and sharp retort and would never allow one member of the family to show anger to another on account of it. In later years his famous sons and daughters, Charles, Edward, Thomas, and Henry, Catherine, Isabella, and Harriet, reaped rich blessings from such splendid intellectual training in argument and witty turn. It was an education to breathe the atmosphere of such a home. Beecher's prayers were one of his most effective ways of touching the

heart. Usually in the home they were very simple petitions, but as the flood of revival swept about his doors, his soul was filled with exultation and heavenly enthusiasm, and the prayers that went up from that home at this time were a very exaltation and must have beaten with irresistible force against the very throne of the Most High.

And now I have to speak of that which fills us with amazement. It is the sober thread woven throughout the whole web of his career, tracing which I was led into many a secret of his life and power. This man of power, with his "gold-nugget thoughts" and intense energy, suffered all his life from severe nervous troubles; nine months at East Hampton unable to preach, months at Litchfield, forced into travel while at Boston, crying "I shall die if you do not give me relief," often despondent, yet ever faithfully, in decline or recovery, working to reach the "mark of the high calling."

The Emmanuel movement is not the first attempt of an orthodox ministry to aid the spiritual through the physical, or vice versa. Taught by his own experience, Beecher was led to perceive the need of a "clinical theology," as he called it. Many a despairing penitent was surprised on consultation with him in regard to "their state" at being met with questions in regard to diet and exercise. We will not, I think, do injustice to him or his method if we imagine a conversation between him and some sensitive soul. "Do you believe, doctor, that such as I are destined to eternal damnation?" (Notice the touch of Calvinism.) "What did you eat for breakfast?" "What shall I do if I am not elected?" "Take a walk before breakfast and don't go to church for a month." The fact is that Dr. Beecher differentiated between "Lachrymal religion" and dyspepsia when neither was well understood.

For his own use he kept in his back yard parallel bars, single bar, ladder, and so on, in order to work off nervous strain. When the weather was particularly bad or the strain acute he would rush to the cellar where he always kept a load of sand: here he would set industriously to work and shovel the sand all over to one side of the cellar, after which he would shovel it back again. We might multiply incidents of his effort to recover nervous control, his farming enterprises, etc., but these



are sufficient to draw the lesson of difficulties overcome by a singleness of purpose in Christian service and a will indomitable.

His reputation as an organizer, revivalist, and defender of the faith flowed westward and he was recognized throughout the country as the greatest divine of his day. A flattering call came to him from a Philadelphia church, but he was firmly resolved not to leave his Boston parish.

In 1830 he received an invitation to become president of Lane Seminary in Ohio. He was much interested in the attempt to build up the seminary but declined the position because he was busy with his people in building a church, the one on Hanover Street having burned down. Two years later he was prepared to refuse the same position because he felt he was needed at that time in Boston by the Presbyterian Church as a denomination. But the appeal was urgent and his belief was strong in the need for the west of such a seminary as this proposed to be, so he finally accepted the call. In 1832 the scene of his labors was transferred to Walnut Hills, just out of Cincinnati, and here he took up the work which occupied the last twenty years of his active life.

The only equipment the seminary had at this time was a charter, sixty acres of land, and an endowment of \$6,000. As soon as it was known that Dr. Beecher was to fill the presidential chair \$60,000 to \$70,000 were pledged for the seminary's support. Beecher insisted that he should maintain the position of pastor as well as teacher, both for the good of the students and for his own intellectual growth. He secured the pastorate of one of the neighboring churches, Second Church, which he filled for thirteen years. During these years he did an incredible amount of work, raised funds for the support of the seminary, attended to the administrative work of the institution, lectured to students, preached at the church and conversed with the regenerate. The fact that he was in charge of the seminary gave stability and character to its affairs and brought financial aid from east and west. The classes were large and in a couple of years things were in a flourishing condition. It was in the third year of Dr. Beecher's work here that an event occurred which nearly ruined the prospects of the institution.

It was still thirty years before the great War of the Rebellion, but the question of slavery and anti-slavery was a lively one, full of heat and occasional flashes of lightning. Young enthusiasts in our northern universities were frequently gathered together in anti-slavery clubs. Such a club existed at Lane. The faculty were not unsympathetic, but wisely restrained excessive zeal on the part of the club. It was looked upon, however, with disfavor by the trustees and, in 1834, during the temporary absence of Dr. Beecher, they passed a vote prohibiting all such clubs in the institution. In spite of Dr. Beecher's efforts to settle matters satisfactorily, the students left in a body. This was a fearful blow to the seminary. It was not only now without students, but was receiving unfavorable comments from the press as a "Bastile of oppression—a spiritual inquisition"—comments which made the prospects of getting new students well nigh hopeless. Many thought that Dr. Beecher would leave under these conditions, for he was out of sympathy with the trustees, and even the eye of a prophet might have seen it a part of wisdom to give up so unpromising a work and return to the pulpit. But he was of too sanguine and buoyant a nature to see defeat, and surrender under such circumstances. He went to work to obtain other pupils. His life here was a constant struggle against difficulties such as these: the classes were small (averaging only five a year for the next four years), some professors gave up in discouragement, and not enough money came in to pay his own salary.

It was in the midst of these earlier difficulties that there arose his famous trial, in which Dr. Wilson, a member of his church, strove to show that Beecher was unsound in the faith and so unfit for his position. This trial has been of great interest to me and I would like to have presented it quite fully had I the time. It was really a struggle between the Old School and the New, between absolutism and moral government. The points of difference are rather bewildering and, in fact, the disputants themselves were not always sure of them. In general the Old School stuck close to the principle of predestination, while the New School went farther than the Confession of Faith, which blends the two thoughts into an *inharmonious* whole, and

laid stress on the freedom of the will. Beecher's strong belief in the compassion and mercy of a loving Father led him in more than one discourse to mitigate the harshness of strict Old School Calvinism, as we have noted in the case of his work on "Infant Salvation" and in his inquiry meeting, and he thus, though unidentified with the New School, was, by Dr. Wilson, brought into the controversy in such a way as to be forced to defend it. Beecher tried in all gentleness and honor to avoid the conflict, but, being forced, he went into it with his usual clear-sighted, lawyer-like skill. He was a far greater man than Dr. Wilson and had more intelligent support. Wilson lost his case in every court from first to last, while at each trial Beecher was allowed to present his interpretation of the Confession and give expression to his views of orthodoxy, views which seem to be far up to the common sense of our day. (So far as I can see, he came mighty near being a Congregationalist, and if that isn't common-sense, what is?)

For twenty years Beecher kept faithfully at his post in the seminary, resigning in turn his pastorate of the Second Church, his professorship of theology, and, in 1851, the presidency. How many a man he had inflamed here among the divinity students with the eternal fire of the Living Word is written only in the Lamb's Book of Life.

From Cincinnati he went to Maine, Boston, and Brooklyn in turn, to visit his friends and his children. In the last place he made his home near his son, Henry, until his death. We gladly pass over the last few years of his life, for, worn by age and a career of such nervous energy, his mental vision became clouded and with the old passionate love for public service he was yet constrained to go his way "sermonless and sorrowful" to the end.

We have studied the *history* of the man, but we are as yet unacquainted with all the richness of his personality. What were some of his characteristics? He was a man of medium height and breadth, and of muscular frame. His features were of a Roman cast, intellectual and genial, capable of expressing emotion, yet easily set into lines of decision and sternness. An earnestness and intensity in the pulpit made up for a lack in rich-



ness of tone, for he had no "liquid rotundity" of voice, no pleasing registers.

His expressions were often terse, bordering sometimes on rudeness. Yet I do not wish it to be understood that he did not have beauty of diction; his figurative expressions are to me a source of envy. His portrayals were very vivid. At one time he preached a descriptive sermon of Mary at Jesus' feet, and before he was through his audience and he himself were in tears. As we read this incident in connection with Beecher, we recall of him the words of Virgil,

"Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt."

In his autobiography he says, "The soul of eloquence is feeling, and in the ministry *holy* feeling." Such emotions as he showed in the pulpit were but reflections of the compassion of the Almighty. We may get a further idea of how he affected his hearers from an account of one of his revival meetings. "I went and preached. I saw one young man with his head down. I wanted to know if it was an arrow of the Almighty. I came along after sermon and laid my hand upon his head. He lifted his face, his eyes all full of tears; I saw it was God."

Dr. Beecher had an invariable habit of casting his sermons into two parts, a "statement and argument addressed purely to the understanding and a passionate and direct appeal to urge the audience to some practical result." Dr. Dwight says of him that "his strength lay in putting things, in driving." His sudden changes of thought often brought a smile; he was naturally of a humorous turn, but blended the humorous with the serious in such a way as not to detract from the general effect.

His keen insight into affairs is well illustrated in a letter to a young minister in which he gives advice of lasting value. "On the whole, I remark, it is a *common thing, almost universal*, for a person newly settled to get discouraged and run low somewhere about the close of the second year. Some break down. Others work up their ideas, and grow discouraged and lazy, preach hasty, extempore sermons, neglect study, and are either dismissed, or, living through and seeing the danger, begin to rise and grow. And this has been the turning point with many a man."

His brief proverbial sayings, according to one doctor of divinity, have been more commonly quoted in private and public life than those of any other American save Benjamin Franklin. Men repeated them even more for their wisdom than for the wit which they contained. Three quotations must suffice here. "Eloquence is logic set afire." "The soul in the body is enclosed within mud walls through the chinks of which the brilliant light of the soul shines." "Walking is *not* the best form of exercise for students: you don't *think* with your *legs*."

Beecher was loved not only by his congregation, but by his colleagues in the ministry as well. His deference to their opinions and his own deep love for them won for him their respect and affection. His daughter in speaking of this affection for them, says, "His friendships were constant and imperishable, passing the love of woman." Similar indeed to the impression he made on the men of his time is that he had made on the mind of at least one young man of the present day.

A great life is a volume of apothegms, each of which may itself be elaborated into a volume or find its expression in a thousand lives lived long after its author has passed through the portals of the unknown. The personality of Beecher is not like a deep and placid pool by whose side men once stood to admire its depth and beauty, but which at length has oozed away, leaving only a parched and arid land: it is more like the inexhaustible fountain of the rain clouds sprinkling its inspiration down through the vistas of time into the hearts and minds of men.

FENWICKE LINDSAY HOLMES.





